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- Highlights of the History of Lawrence County, Tennessee

# Highlights of the History of Lawrence County, Tennessee

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Many factors contributed to the settlement of Lawrence County. Among those were fertile soil, abundant streams, cheap or free land, virgin forests and the ever present need to “go westward.” Even though the Native Americans still claimed the region, settlers were eager to explore the new land, stake a claim and provide a home for their families. From 1805 to 1816, there was a series of Indian land cessions involving land along the Tennessee River that eventually lead to the creation of Lawrence and several more of the southern counties.

The legislature passed the Private Act of 1817 thereby creating a county from a portion of Hickman, Giles and Maury Counties to be called Lawrence County in honor of Captain James Lawrence, hero of the War of 1812. This same act established a Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, which became the governing body of the county with authority for the making and carrying out of laws, overseeing court related issues, setting tax rates and fees, issuing fines and other matters.

When first created, Lawrence County covered a much larger area, with the northwest boundary extending all the way to Grinder's Stand in what is now Lewis County. The boundaries between counties were constantly changing. The most drastic change occurred in the county's northern border in 1843, when Lewis County was created and the section in Lawrence County from just above Napier northward to the Duck River Ridge was included in Lewis. In 1885, part of Napier was annexed into Lewis County and the rest of the Napier area in 1889. The area around Iron City became a part of Lawrence County in 1867.

Lawrenceburg was the name chosen by the General Assembly to become the county seat. The selection of a site for this town became a heated debate amount the five commissioners appointed by the governor – Josephus Irvine, David Crockett, Maximillian H. Buchanan, Enoch Tucker and Henry Phoenix. Three commissioners wanted the town

to be at its present location, but the other two insisted the town should be placed in the exact geographical center of the county. After various petitions signed by residents were forwarded to the legislature, the present location was chosen. There were two important considerations in this decision: 1) the location was bounded on the east by Andrew Jackson's newly constructed highway (a major thoroughfare from Nashville to New Orleans) which would provide a mode of transportation, playing a significant role in the economic development of the county; 2) Shoal Creek (originally Sycamore River) with its three tributaries – Crowson, Simonton or Middle Fork (originally Indian Creek) and Beeler's Fork; and also Spout Springs, bounded the favored site and would provide an abundant supply of water for its residence and industries. During this time, David Crockett resigned his commission and was replaced by Martin Prewitt.

The commissioners were granted 400 acres by the State of Tennessee January 16, 1823. M.H. Buchanan surveyed the lots and laid out the town of Lawrenceburg. The commissioners proceeded to sell lots to various individuals for business and residences, with the proceeds to be used to construct a courthouse, jail and stockades on the square. The town began to bustle with the construction of buildings to house hotels, lawyers and doctor's offices, blacksmiths and merchants, and homes for residents.

Court was first held in the house of Joseph Farmer, occupied by Josephus Irvine at the time, "presumed" to be just past Ethridge. A temporary courthouse in Lawrenceburg ready for use in April of 1821 evidently became the permanent courthouse. Instead of building a new courthouse, this one was repaired numerous times until the decision was made in 1848 to build a brick addition around the existing one including a second floor, then a third floor. During the Civil War, when Federal Troops were about to burn the courthouse, they were convinced by the citizens the Mexican War Monument would be destroyed. For a short time during the Civil War, the town was occupied by Union Troops and the courthouse used by them. Prisoners were also housed here after the war until a new jail was built. This courthouse was used until 1904 when it was torn down to build the 1905 courthouse.

In 1974, a new courthouse was built on West Gaines St. In 2008, the courthouse was again overcrowded with no room for new records. A bank building next to the courthouse has been purchased and is being renovated to house those offices that do not deal with court related matters. The circuit and chancery court offices will remain in the courthouse along with the jail and sheriff's office creating a justice center.

Next in line of importance was transportation. This included ordering jury of views to establish roads or determine the best route for a road to be changed to a

Lawrence County is 863 feet above sea level, with the highest point being just east of Summertown and the lowest in Sugar Creek. The temperature can range from the single digits in the winter to over 100 degrees in the summer. Extremely high humidity often makes summer months feel oppressive. The principal streams of the county are Shoal Creek, Factory Fork, Beeler's Fork, Chisholm Creek, Knob Creek, Sugar Creek, Blue Water, and Little and Big Buffalo Rivers. While some settlers found fertile land, others found land that was either dense forests, barrens, or poor land overgrown with vegetation or swamps. The forests were populated by wolves, wildcats, deer, turkeys and various other animals and birds. Besides their skills and trades, they brought with them their hopes and dreams, willingness to work hard, and their determination to succeed and better their lives. And appointing overseers and hands to layout and do upkeep on these roads. The two main thoroughfares through Lawrence County today are Highway 43 running north and south and Highway 64 running east and west.

After the Revolutionary War, some who served were given military land grants for their service in lieu of monetary compensation. However, the majority of the land grants in Lawrence County were occupant grants given for a small fee if they lived on it for three years and showed improvements. Homes were built, land cleared and crops planted. Crops grown were wheat, corn, fruits, tobacco, and some cotton. Livestock kept during Lawrence County's early years were mainly cows, sheep, pigs, mules, horses and oxen. Early industry consisted of sawmills, flour mills,

powder mills, cotton mills and the production of iron ore.

The area around Henryville was the first actual settlement before Lawrence became a county. Small communities and a few villages begin to appear in other areas of the county – Blue Water, Chinubee, West Point, Rossborough, Appleton/Pinhook, Sugar Creek, Wayland Springs, Wolf Creek, Marcella Falls, Pleasant Point, and Fall River.



The Civil War took a tremendous toll on Lawrence County. The economy was at its lowest point. Many Lawrence Countians died fighting or of disease, while others simply did not return. Most of those who were not involved in the fighting, and the soldiers who returned, found they had suffered great losses. Both Union and Confederate Soldiers, or marauders, had confiscated their food supply and livestock, some homes were burned, and in some cases, a member of their family had been murdered.

Lawrence County did not have a vast amount of plantations. Most were simple farmers, merchants and tradesmen. However, there were a few large plantation owners who suffered great losses principally due to liberation of their slave labor, devaluation of money and other losses during the Civil War. Before the war and the establishment of the Federal money system, each bank issued their own money. Therefore, most Confederate money was totally worthless.

During this period, northerners were sent to each state to make sure officials loyal to the Union were elected and the courts were allowed to once again hold regular sessions. No deeds were recorded from the time period of December 1863 until March of 1866. Not many marriages took place and only some courts were allowed to be in session. Lawrence Countians were busy restoring their towns, road, farms, schools, economy and their life. A whole new way of life had to be learned by families whose large farms were dependent upon slave labor. Many citizens were bankrupt and lost their homes or farms through foreclosure, while others were able to sell.

African Americans were also undergoing big changes in their lifestyle. Their transition from slavery to freedom was filled with difficulties. Even though they had been slaves, their homes, food and a few necessities had been provided by their owner. Now they must strive to make their own way by acquiring or renting property, build their homes and churches and provide for their families. They were still not accepted as equal by most southerners and organizations were formed to discourage their progress. Many left Lawrence County for other counties or states. Those that remained settled in various communities and either worked for their former owner for a fee, farmed the few acres they could purchase, found odd jobs using skills they learned during slavery, worked in mining or other small industries.

Industrial activity in Lawrence County was severely hampered in the early years of the 19th Century because of the lack of a railroad making it difficult to carry goods to the market. Until the railroad was built, much of what was

produced by agricultural crops was carried by wagon to the Tennessee River at Clifton and Florence, or to the railroad at Pulaski to be shipped to markets. There were two possible routes from Nashville to the iron deposits near Birmingham, with the route through Lawrence County being chosen. In 1879, the Columbia, Lawrenceburg & Florence Railroad Company was organized. The main drive behind the railroad was Colonel George Henry Nixon, who was the president of the Company, and later referred to as the “Father of the Railroad” in Lawrence County. In October of 1883, the railroad was completed to Lawrenceburg. By 1884, the line was completed 56 miles from Columbia to St. Joseph, then for three years the line was dormant while the iron fields were being developed. The railroad was finally finished on July 1, 1888. This included a spur line from Iron City to the famous Pinkney Mines two miles northwest of West Point. The completion of the line through Lawrence County gave new life to several communities in the county and gave birth to others that had not previously existed.

The large influx of mostly German Catholic immigrants from northern states, starting in 1870 and continuing through the late 1890s, also helped to boost the economy and almost doubled the population of Lawrence County. The Cincinnati German Catholic Homestead Association had purchased several thousand acres of land in Lawrenceburg and other areas of the county. These families brought their skills and trades to our county, opened businesses, built homes, churches and schools. Farmers among this group expanded their property and prospered; others were involved in the mining and timber business.

Also, in the mid-1880s through the early part of 1900, E. W. “Farmer” Crews, a land speculator/realtor purchased large quantities of land mostly from Ethridge to Buffalo Road and further. He advertised in many northern states, inviting families to visit our county, painting the picture of opportunities far greater than they actually were. About the same time, Joseph J. Crane, in the Summertown vicinity, and other realtors across the county, were enticing new settlers into the region to further populate the county and boost the economy. Then, in the early 1890s a small group of Norwegians settled in and around Lawrenceburg.



From 1908-1920s, countless families arrived from Cullman, Winston, Lawrence, Franklin and Morgan counties in Alabama. These industrious people, at first, purchased land mostly in the southeast part of Lawrence County. Here, they found virgin timber and sawmills sprang up everywhere. After the timber was cleared, a majority of these families planted what they knew best – cotton. As a result, gins sprang up in many communities. These settlers, coming together from so many regions, brought about a wide range of crops grown in Lawrence County, with a large percentage being shipped to other areas, mostly by rail. From 1900 to 1920, the population of Lawrence County grew from 15,402 to 23,593, creating quite an economic boom.

Lawrenceburg completed its first electrical power plant in 1908 providing the town with cheap electricity and later expanded to three miles out including some farmers and small industries. This was a great boost to the economy

since it enticed industries to Lawrence County. Profits paid for street construction, paving, fire fighting equipment and city taxes were lowered. The second power plant and dam to produce more electricity was in operation by 1924. Not long afterwards, Lawrenceburg again needed more power for the expanding growth in population and industry. However, these dams continued to provide electricity until TVA took over in the 1930s.

The next arrival of a large group of immigrants occurred in March of 1956, when Murray Ohio Mfg. Co. moved their offices and plant to Lawrenceburg. Approximately 100 supervisors and their families made the move to Lawrence County. Over the years, a wide variety of products were made including bicycles, tricycles, lawnmowers, peddle cars and fans. Originally 550 employees were hired, but at its peak, employment was as high as 5,000, with over 4,000 of them being at the plant in Lawrenceburg.

Lawrence County has continued to grow in population, economically and demographically over the years and in 2017 will celebrate its 200th birthday. It is now a diverse county with many different cultures, professions, religions and interests. The population of all residents is now 39,926.